

## Recovering the Maternal Body as Paradise: Michèle Roberts's 'Charity'

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Michèle Roberts's 'Charity' —published in her first collection of short fiction *During Mother's Absence* (1994)— fictionalises a woman's attempt to come to terms with the figure of her own mother in order to recover the maternal body as paradise. In discursive terms, this process of reconsideration, forgiveness and recovery is achieved by the character's enactment of her own perspective as a child, dependant on language, memory, and mythic reconstructions of her own past. This article examines the complex terms of the mother-daughter relationship in Roberts's short story, which offers an interesting feminist permutation of the traditional male pattern of maturation —or Oedipus complex— by exclusively focusing on the mother-daughter dyad. Furthermore, Robert's short story offers a psychoanalytically-inspired example of maternal splitting into the spiritual and the eroticised mother, which the narrator will learn to reconcile as she enters the threshold of maturity.

Keywords: Michèle Roberts; 'Charity'; motherhood; child's perspective; psychoanalysis; body.

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## Recuperar el cuerpo materno como paraíso: 'Charity', de Michèle Roberts

El relato 'Charity' de Michèle Roberts , publicado en la colección *During Mother's Absence* (1994), que muestra los esfuerzos de la narradora protagonista por recuperar la figura materna. En términos discursivos, este proceso de reconsideración y perdón se consigue a través de la recuperación de la perspectiva infantil, ligada al lenguaje, la memoria y a una reconstrucción mítica del propio pasado de la protagonista. Este artículo examina los términos complejos de la relación madre e hija en 'Charity', relato que ofrece una interesante variación sobre el patrón tradicional de evolución psicológica infantil, o complejo edípico, al centrarse exclusivamente en la díada madre-hija. Finalmente, y en términos psicoanalíticos, el relato de Roberts ofrece un ejemplo de la fragmentación del sujeto materno en la madre espiritual y la madre erótica, que la protagonista aprenderá a reconciliar al cruzar el umbral del mundo adulto.

Palabras clave: Michèle Roberts; 'Charity'; maternidad; perspectiva infantil; psicoanálisis; corporeidad

## 1. INTRODUCTION

When discussing the short piece entitled ‘Charity’, compiled in her first collection of stories, *During Mother’s Absence* (1994), Michèle Roberts highlighted the relevance of choosing the tangential, marginal perspective of a child, as part of a young girl’s rebellion against her own father’s “omniscient narrative . . . ; I felt trapped in his story of who I was in life” (Newman 2004).<sup>1</sup> Roberts’s story offers an interesting feminist permutation of the traditional male pattern of maturation —or Oedipus complex— by exclusively focusing on the mother-daughter relationship, discursively realised by Roberts’s rejection of omniscience —or of the powerful paternal pattern of familiar dominance along with the elision of the male figure— while also bringing to the fore suggestive rewritings of monoparental models of motherhood, offered in the text through various icons of the *Madonna*, which also signal physical and spiritual communion between mother and child.

‘Charity’ fictionalises a young woman’s recollection of her childhood, in an attempt to come to terms with her own mother —whose status as such she has till recently denied— in order to, in Roberts’s own words, recover “the maternal body as paradise” (Newman 2004). In discursive terms, this process of reconsideration, forgiveness and, ultimately, recovery is achieved in the text by Marie’s enactment of her own perspective as a child, dependant on language, memory and a particular conception of innocence. The aim of this paper is to examine the complex terms of the mother-daughter relationship in Robert’s short story —a story both ideologically and symbolically embedded in the dynamics underpinning the collection in which it appears, significantly entitled *During Mother’s Absence*, encompassing both physical and/or emotional departure from the mother.

Roberts’s aforementioned rejection of omniscience in favour of a subjective, imaginative first-person young voice works in the narrative as textual evidence of the complex process of bringing back the character’s own childhood through the imaginative fictionalisations of her mother and of their own relationship: “The place of imagination is . . . the place inside us where we hold and contain a kind of thinking which re-members how we were as children and still can be: non-rational, wanting to make and give gifts, playful, aggressive, destructive, sad, reparative, joyful. It’s a safe place, in which to let go of old certainties, let boundaries dissolve, experience the kind of chaos necessary for new life, new ideas” (Roberts 1998: 22).

As Roberts herself has explained at length (2008), psychoanalysis has functioned as a major inspiring methodological framework, not only to come to terms with her own past, but also as a driving force to explain maturation patterns and psychological development in her narrative. As such, this article also draws from various psychoanalytically-inspired critical works which have focused on the child’s process of emotional growth from a feminist slant by looking into the terms of the mother-daughter relationship, core to

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Roberts's narrative. In psychoanalytical terms, 'Charity' dramatises what Luce Irigaray has termed as "the bodily encounter with the mother" (1991: 39), which the Law of the Father forbids, through the exploration of feminine desire and the role of the maternal (38), the imaginary and symbolic relationship with the woman-mother (35).

## 2. RECOVERING PARADISE THROUGH A CHILD'S PERSPECTIVE

Michèle Roberts herself has suggested how the process of re-enacting one's own past focuses on the individual's need to recover what has been irretrievably lost, and which, as she sees it, inevitably tackles one's relationship with the mother (Roberts 1998: 21). Drawing on the reflections of outstanding postmodern feminists, Roberts overtly acknowledges the capacity of literature to effectively re-imagine, and to some extent recover, one's childhood and the maternal body:

Images come from the period of my childhood spent partly in France. They give me back what I lost —childhood— and enable me to re-create it idealistically as a happy paradise. They stand in, these images of lost bliss, as images of something even more specific than childhood: she who is paradise itself for the baby, the growing child: the mother. The power of these photographs comes from their capacity to give me back what I lost, thought I had lost for ever: the maternal body, my mother's body, alive and warm and generous, an image of that body which says that is how she was, that is how we were, once, together. Blissful mutual giving and taking. What the French call *la jouissance* and what the French feminists like Julia Kristeva and Hélène Cixous say we find again through writing and reading. (Roberts 1998: 20)

Significantly, Roberts first dramatised such a journey to the maternal in creative terms through her characters' quests, though it was later systematised in non-fictional reflections on her writing practice, as her collection of essays *Food, Sex and God: On Inspiration and Writing* (1998) demonstrates. The recreation of one's own childhood —"paradise" being Roberts's expression for the individual's privileged relationship with the mother at that time— requires the ability to intertwine personal memories with the fictional reconstruction of the past. As Sara Ruddick explains, "personal fantasy, fictional representation, and social and cultural reality are so interconnected where motherhood is concerned that it is impossible to talk about one without the other" (qtd. in Suleiman 1988: 27). As a result, in her fictional works, Roberts consistently uses epiphanic moments as a discursive strategy to elide divisions in time and space, not only to powerfully question traditional boundaries of history, culture, and identity (White 2003: 71), but also to suggestively discuss the individual's necessity to come to terms with the past through innumerable rewritings, revisions, and fictionalisations. This process of repetition and recollection may eventually throw light onto the individual's fragmentary identity: "I've had to see things as broken, separated into their component parts, and these I am examining, through the process of metaphor. . . I have to go backwards and forwards and

around, just as the eye travels in a cubist painting. . . . It's not the original . . . but my own version, my own myth" (Roberts 1983: 67).

Roberts's urge to write seems to be dependant on her own need to come to terms with her mother, as well as on the promise which fiction offers to recover an individual's past and the maternal body with it. Roberts's female protagonist implicitly deconstructs the linear narrative of her childhood, which will eventually enable her to cope with her inherited, conflicting versions of femininity in order to accept her mother in the ultimate act of love: of "charity", of "mutual giving and taking", as Roberts would have it.

As explained previously, the story is discursively articulated as a first person reverie of the past childhood of Marie, the narrator, who is perceived as a bright, talented orphan who lives under the care of her aunt —referred to as "Auntie" in the narrative; a most unconventional yet loving and affectionate woman. Marie is a boarder in the Catholic convent of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, and through her innocent narrative the reader progressively understands, as Marie herself does, that the child's social isolation springs from Auntie's real status in social and family terms: she is a prostitute, as well as Marie's own mother.

The child's point of view often accomplishes what Slavoj Žižek has defined as a postmodern "shift of perspective", where the repressed truth of the false totality emerges and is displaced "into the very heart of the narrative" (1992: 123). Rhetorically speaking, the child's perspective proves particularly fruitful, for it renders an alienated, marginal, distorted and de-socialised vision of normative power. The child is more than an aesthetic innovation leaping *ex nihilo* into fictive existence, or a surrogate for unconscious, impulsive lives, for, as a symbolic referent, it possesses "a transformative power which influences not only the image we have of children, but also the image we have of ourselves as adults" (Kuhn 1982: 4). In Roberts's own terms, the evocation and reconstruction of childhood carries the possibility of construing one's identity, and of coming to terms with it:

I'm suggesting that the place of imagination is at the heart of each of us, at the heart of culture, of society. It's the place inside us where we hold and contain a kind of thinking which remembers how we were as children and still can be: non-rational, wanting to make and give gifts, playful, aggressive, destructive, sad, reparative, joyful. It's a safe place, in which to let go of old certainties, let boundaries dissolve, experience the kind of chaos necessary for new life, new ideas. It's a space we need inside our culture, a space we need to hold our children in, contain them safely in while they fight and learn. (1998: 22)

### 3. THE KERNEL OF *JOUISSANCE*

Roberts's 'Charity' is inaugurated by the main character's dream, which dramatises Marie's eventual communion with her mother in an epiphanic encounter which not only signals a physical and spiritual reunion of mother and daughter, but also Marie's entry into adulthood:

I have a young erotic mother . . . My mother's flesh is warm. The sheets are cool and smooth. I lay hands on her hips and pull her close, kiss her soft mouth, her shoulders, stroke her hair, the wet silky place between her legs. The storm drums on the roof. She kisses and caresses me. Her smell grows stronger, like a garden after the rain. She offers me her breast, round and white and fat, ardently we lie in each other's arms, touching kissing sucking biting, then my swollen cunt boils over and I come. (1993: 32)

The location of this passage is privileged within the narrative, and takes place immediately after Marie learns of her mother's recent death. The character's unconscious desires shape this dream, and find physical embodiment in the private, motherly realm, as Roberts herself has suggested:

I write about the unconscious as a place and I also think I write about the unconscious as a kind of energy and a kind of language formation. It's a kind of poetic language. And it is a free space, particularly for these women [Roberts's female characters] because I think women have been so repressed into the unconscious of the culture if you like, that (a) it's where we've belonged but (b) it's where we can begin to invent ourselves. (García Sánchez 2005: 140)

The protagonist's bodily encounter with the mother also dramatises a woman's discovery of sexual identity, the singularity of her desire and auto-eroticism (Irigaray 1991: 44).

In addition, the passage clearly dramatises the character's efforts to diminish the separation between "the hard kernel of *jouissance*" (Žižek 1997: 50) and the maternal body—absent and irretrievably lost—by returning to it in a dream that Roberts describes as being "some pre-linguistic state of bliss, which is about unity and non-separation" (Newman 2004), and Kristeva (1984) as a "nonexpressive totality" (25), best dramatised through the image of breast-feeding, here overtly linked with erotic pleasure. The protagonist of the narrative discovers what Irigaray has termed "the singularity of *jouissance*" (1991: 45), which here functions according to the mother principle, thus deviating from the heterosexual phallic model. For Roberts, the Christian divorce between spirit and flesh, reflection and desire, represents an artificially erected barrier, as she explains in her essay entitled 'The Place of Imagination' (1994), where she discusses the taboos which traditionally pertain to the blissful communion between mother and daughter: "Women can have . . . trouble in finding an image of sensual loving delight between mother and daughter; the taboo of homosexuality sees to that, it's not just the lived difficulties of that crucial relationship so many of us battle with. Yet we search for the image, try to make one, to make one up. We try to mend what was broken" (1998: 21).

The spiritual and sensual communion between mother and daughter is strongly suggested in the dream by, among other things, the mother's lactating, which further on in the narrative brings to the fore major issues pertaining to motherhood, spirituality, and the construction of female subjectivity, as will be discussed later. As such, breast-feeding emerges as a major motif in 'Charity' from the narrative's very inception which,

in psychoanalytical terms, also tackles the problematic of the character's ambivalent feelings towards her mother, whose nominal status as such is denied through much of the narrative. In general terms, breast-feeding is seen to encapsulate the child's ambiguous feelings toward the mother; a conflicting mixture of tenderness, gratitude, and destructive rage. Its experience is alternatively gratifying and frustrating, and it also constitutes the starting point of the child's fantasies: "The baby reacts to unpleasant stimuli, and to the frustration of pleasure through feelings of hatred and aggression. These feelings of hatred are directed towards the same objects as are the pleasurable ones, namely, the breast of the mother" (Klein 1977: 290). However, the child's initial rage and aggression towards the (lost) mother must necessarily be "channelled into the creation of a restorative and reparative image of her which can in turn form the basis of the image of herself" as an adult (Hanson 2000: 231). Roberts has consistently emphasised how psychoanalysis has succeeded in enabling/helping/allowing her to follow her own urge to look into the repressed, and come to terms with it, most often through the writing process:

You'll have heard echoes in what I've been saying of the work of Freud, of Melanie Klein, of contemporary writers on art sympathetic to Klein like Marion Milner, Peter Fuller. Certainly I'm indebted to their work, which has helped me to shape own my ideas. But I need to stress the personal aspect of the search. Before reading these writers I was surprised how everything I wrote went back to maternal loss, maternal absence, and now dares to re-imagine maternal presence, fullness. I find these theories suggestive, powerfully evocative, "true", because I've experienced what they're saying inside myself, inside my own work. (1998: 21-22)

#### 4. FAMILY ROMANCE

'Charity', like most of Roberts's fictional works, dramatises such a movement from rage towards reparation of the maternal in order to construe a subjectivity according to what she calls "the mother principle, the feminine principle" (1983: 65), accomplished both by means of storytelling and by theoretical reflection as bone structure for the narrative:

I know that I write out of the experience of loss; the earliest experience of the loss of my mother. Loss is an emptiness filled with terrifying feelings: burning hate, sizzling despair, rage that tears you apart. I hated my mother (the fantasy image of her I constructed inside myself) for not always being there when I wanted her, or as much as I needed . . . Hate sets up in turn the need for love, to move back into love; hate impelled me to fill up its emptiness with images I could take back to my mother (in my imagination) and offer her as gifts, emblems of my need for her forgiveness, for her love. (1983: 64)

Similarly, Marie feels the urge to initiate a process of reparation and recovery, which is discursively fulfilled through her particular reconstruction of her past, in an effort to come to terms with Auntie's identity and with the acknowledgement of the woman's



true position in family life. However, due to Marie's strict Catholic upbringing as well as to social conventionalities, the character finds that such an unpalatable fact needs to be disguised and rewritten so as to be socially acceptable. The behaviour of both Marie and Auntie therefore elaborates on a tacit variation of the Freudian family romance, described by the psychoanalyst as a necessary yet painful step involved in the child's psychological development towards maturity, necessarily implying "the liberation of the individual, as he grows up, from the authority of his parents" (Freud 1959: 237). According to Freud, for a small child his parents are "at first the only authority and the source of all belief", and "his most momentous wish during these early years is to be like his parents (that is, the parent of his own sex)" (1959: 237). Yet, as the child acquires emotional maturity, he or she cannot help discovering the gender category to which his or her parents belong, aided by the knowledge of and comparison to other parents, a fact that often provokes dissatisfaction and becomes the initial point of criticism towards his/her parents. Within this pattern of maturation, and in order to support his or her critical attitude, the child considers that other parents are preferable to his or her own (1959: 237). The child's sense that his or her own affection is not fully reciprocated finds "a vent in the idea . . . of being a step-child or adopted child" (238). As a result, the child may develop a fantasy sustained by the belief that his or her family are not actually his or her own, biologically speaking, and that s/he is in fact heir to different parents of better birth (1959: 238). Roberts's narrative fictionalises this in Marie's recollection of her own family: "I don't remember my parents. Auntie told me they died in a plane crash when I was two, coming back from holiday. I was lucky they left me with my aunt or I'd have been dead too. I don't miss them at all because I can't remember them. I'm very lucky because first Auntie adopted me, then when I got too much for her the nuns let me be a full-time boarder" (1993: 51–52).

Marie not only envies in her friends the traditional dynamics of a bourgeois family, but also privately resents the absence of a father figure, who is, however, present in her own fantasised version of the Freudian family romance. During her childhood years Marie preserves this fantasy in order to avoid social rejection and to adapt her personal circumstances to the normative bourgeois nuclear family that she so envies in her friends: "[Auntie] didn't much like me mixing with other children and never let me bring a friend home for tea. I went to other children's houses for tea at first in primary school, then less and less because I couldn't invite them back. We'll keep ourselves to ourselves, she always said" (1993: 36).

Under a traditional capitalist system, men produced valuable capital whereas women became commodities, being valuable only at the cost of the preservation of their virtue (Irigaray 1991: 36), as Marie compulsively repeats as a result of her indoctrination. Within this capitalist division of labour, women's work in the private realm centres on the indoctrination of their offspring in patriarchal ideology, thus perpetuating the very system that oppresses them. Women's attempts to transcend the private sphere are negatively perceived by conservative factions as being the result of a precarious domestic economy:

“Ugly Face [Marie’s teacher] is sorry for Mary’s mother because she has to go out to work and can’t dedicate her entire life to her family like other girls’ mothers do. Only lower-class mothers work” (1993: 48). Significantly, Roberts discusses her memories of her own childhood and adolescence in similar terms: “In adolescence, increasing alienation from myself and from the view of femininity purveyed in the late 1950s/early 1960s culture drove me and my writing underground; I stopped being honest with myself and others about what I felt, and tried to please, and kept my poems, my authentic records, a secret” (1983: 64).

Despite Marie’s internalisation of the norm, she is still able to unconsciously perceive the oppression and subjugation which such a model of silence and invisibility implies for women:

The girls who become nuns have a wedding-day after they’ve been postulants for six months, then they die to the world. It’s very beautiful and sad. They glide up the aisle in their white dresses with their hair spread out down their backs, then the habit and veil are fitted over them and they disappear. But if you get married and have children you disappear as well. Housewives stay at home all day and talk about recipes and babies, they read women’s magazines, they go to the hairdresser’s every week and have their hair cut off and have perms. I shall never get married and have children. I might try and go to university, but after that I’m going to become a nun. (1993: 46)

As Sonia Villegas has extensively discussed (2008: 288), the religious dynamics and hierarchy of convent life reproduce the gendered disposition of the domestic realm, actually functioning as a space for the contemplation of others, rather than at self-reflection. Roberts’s interest in this form of religious education not only springs from her own experience as a Catholic boarder, but also partakes of a concern to reflect on the impact of educational paradigms on women’s lives, as she shows in other fictionalisations on this theme, most notably in the Catholic upbringing of Josephine in *Impossible Saints* (1997).

## 5. MATERNAL SPLITTING

The experience of motherhood equates, for the narrator, with submission and powerlessness, for the idea of maternal power —the power to engender and give birth— has been domesticated, reflecting Rich’s suggestion that “[i]n transfiguring and enslaving the woman, the womb —the ultimate source of power— has historically been turned against us and itself made into a source of powerlessness” (1976: 68). In this sense, the childless, unmarried nuns represent for Marie a realistic example of relative emancipation and independence. Furthermore, a nun would conventionally be posed as the opposite of a prostitute, and Marie’s wish to become a nun exemplifies her ‘matrophobia’, or her fear of becoming her own mother: “Matrophobia can be seen as a womanly splitting of the



self, in the desire to become purged once and for all of our mothers' bondage, to become individuated and free. The mother stands for the victim in ourselves, the unfree woman, the martyr" (Rich 1976: 236).

In addition, Marie's 'surrogate' mother, Auntie, clearly deviates from established models of social and sexual behaviour, upsetting the child with a painful ambivalent clash of feelings of both love and admiration and of shame and hatred. Furthermore, and in line with the character's own ambivalence towards her mother, 'Charity' provides an overt example of what Susan Suleiman has termed "maternal splitting" (1988: 27), the impulse to split the maternal figure into 'good' and 'bad' personae. There is indeed an ancient tradition of tackling the conflicts of the mother-daughter relationship, as Bruno Bettelheim remarks in his psychoanalytically-inspired examination of fairy tales: "Far from being a device used only by fairy tales, such a splitting up of one person into two to keep the good image uncontaminated occurs to many children as a solution to a relationship too difficult to manage or comprehend . . . The fantasy of the wicked stepmother not only preserves the good mother intact, it also prevents having to feel guilty about one's angry thoughts about her" (1987: 67, 69).

In both literal and metaphorical terms, Marie splits the mother figure into what Freud diagnosed as the "mother/whore" syndrome (1963: 58), which disassociates tenderness and sexuality, aiming to preserve the mother's asexual purity. As a result, Marie's suspicion that she is actually the natural daughter of a prostitute is superseded by her own version of the Freudian family romance. Since identification with her own mother would bring about problematic issues concerning sexuality, class, and power, Marie establishes a spiritual affinity—as her own name suggests—with a less problematic, powerful, asexual mother figure: the Virgin Mary becomes Marie's celestial, surrogate mother, while her biological mother, whether consciously or not, is displaced from this role to become Auntie in an effort to avoid social exclusion:

Being illegitimate is the worst thing you can be. Another word for it is bastard. It means you haven't got a father and that your mother isn't married and that she did something really terrible and lower-class. It is very shocking and dirty. It's like an extra dose of original sin and it never rubs off. People whisper and point when they see an illegitimate person. Janice and Karen said I was but it isn't true. (1993: 52)

As a result of this self-protective process of maternal splitting, Marie elaborates on images and iconography of the Virgin Mary, not only because of her Catholic upbringing with the nuns, but also because of her own alleged affinity with Mary as a mother. Revealingly, and by doing this, Marie is unconsciously establishing what Irigaray has called "a genealogy of women" (1991: 44), a permutation of the exploration of matrilineal inheritance, which will eventually bring about the encounter with her mother and the discovery of the protagonist's sexual identity. Of the varied possible invocations of the Mother of God, Marie draws on the Virgin's iconographic representation as *Mater*

*Amabilis*, which suggests a particular consecration of motherhood through tender images—such as breast-feeding—suggesting nurturing and maternal care. As Julia Kristeva has argued, “the relationship with Mary was to be . . . the prototype of a love relationship and followed two fundamental aspects of western love: courtly love and child love” (1997: 305-06) and, more fundamentally, “the fantasy . . . of a lost territory”, of a pervading bonding with the mother, of an “idealization of primary narcissism” (302), that is, the “child’s love for the woman who nursed him” (Bowie 1991: 33), as proposed by Freud in ‘On Narcissism: An Introduction’ (1914).

Marie is perfectly acquainted with the Catholic Marian myth and its different iconographic representations: “Our Lady didn’t die in the normal way. She fell asleep in the arms of St John, then angels came with a silver tray and carried her up to heaven on it. Now she sits side by side with Our Lord on a throne, they look exactly the same age” (1993: 39). Yet Marie does not feel particularly attracted to Marian icons evocative of power and eternity, such as the myth of Mary’s Dormition or her representation as *Maria Regina*. Instead, the little girl establishes a strong affinity with the byzantine icon of Our Lady of Perpetual Succour, for here the Virgin becomes the representation of Charity as the greatest of Theological Virtues, meaning “giving and sustaining” (39), implying endless love and generous support as only a mother is capable of offering. In this sense, Marie often turns to this Marian invocation for spiritual encouragement: “I’ve got a picture of our Lady feeding Jesus stuck under my desk lid . . . She knows how much I wish I was thin and popular and pretty with long straight hair and not so clever. She understands all this and she still loves me. She knows I’m praying so hard the bell will ring soon for the end of the school. Before Janice and Karen can say anything” (42-43).

In this sense, Our Lady of Perpetual Succour works as an example of an intensely felt, personal relationship with the Virgin: in the medieval Madonna icon, arid theology is transformed into “the image of a human, approachable, supremely adorable woman who stood by humanity like a mother but loved it like a mistress” (Warner 1976: 155). Young Marie, as a good, fervent Catholic, regards Mary as the ideal representation of motherhood in its fullness and perfection, despite her exemption by special privilege “from intercourse, from labour, and from other physical processes or ordinary childbearing. One natural biological function, however, was permitted the Virgin in the Christian cult—suckling”, for Mary’s milk symbolises both Jesus’s full humanity as well as the gift of life (Warner 1976: 192-94). For Marie, the Virgin fills the “visions of those, men or women (often children), who were racked by the anguish of maternal frustration”, the breast symbolising the threshold of infantile regression (Kristeva 1997: 311).

In addition to this, the feminisation of the virtue of Charity offers an interesting permutation of the Madonna iconography. According to St Paul, the primacy of this Theological Virtue resides in its compelling the Christian to practice all other virtues, thus embodying the love of God. Marie feels particularly engaged by the practice of this virtue of Charity, and develops a project for Religious Education on the topic:

We're doing a project on Charity this term in RE and we have to do research. We found a book with pictures of the Virtues, who were women from olden times. Justice had a pair of scales, Faith had a sword. Charity was a lady with no clothes on her top under the black bit of paper, feeding four babies at once. I saw a lady do that once in the dentist's waiting-room. She pulled up her jumper, quick as a flash, and I saw her floppy white chest before she pressed the baby's head to it. (1993: 42)

Interestingly, Marie prefers the iconographic representations of Charity rather than its definition in theological terms. It is also significant that Charity has traditionally been represented by various painters throughout history—for example, Anthony Van Dick's 'Charity' (1627–28) or William-Adolphe Bouguereau's 'Le Charité' (1878)—as the idealisation of motherhood through love, care, and feeding, best embodied by the lactating mother, as Marie's unconscious association of thoughts overtly shows.

## 6. LOSS OF EDEN

Marie is soon to discard such idealisations of femininity through motherhood for, as Eva Kittay has suggested, "the Virgin Mary, the female incarnation of Justice, Liberty, Truth, Death; the female Muses" are metaphorical images of woman which emphasise their role as mediators, therefore aiming to represent man's emotional and irrational elements (1997: 271).

Thus, the lactating mother as the idealisation of virtuous femininity is dramatically reversed in the narrative by the allegedly irreconcilable notions of sexual pleasure and eroticism. Young Marie arrives home unexpectedly early from school, only to find Auntie engaged in sexual games with a man:

The room was dim, and the curtains drawn against the afternoon sun. Auntie was resting on the bed. Her eyes were open. A burning cigarette balanced on the ashtray next to her. She was wearing her afternoon frock, the one with mauve and blue flowers on it. It was unbuttoned all down the front. She and the man with her lay very still, like in a photograph. Perhaps they were not still, perhaps that is the way I choose to remember it. I looked at her bare white bosom, at the man who curled in her arms and sucked at one of her breasts like a baby. (1993: 59)

The narrator emphasises her role as such, fictionalising past events when first encountering overt sexuality in a traumatic scene which heralds her loss of the maternal. *A propos* of the subject, Roberts argues: "I've turned more and more to the unconscious, to the ancient memories therein, to resurrect mythic . . . constellations of aspects of the self and others" (1983: 67). In addition to this, Marie's 'resurrection' of her mythic past, of her own subjective construction of childhood, relates to her sudden awareness of the reality of sexuality, which may take the form of a traumatic encounter which forever obliterates "a formerly prelapsarian existence" (Kuhn 1982: 132). As Freud explains in *Three*

*Contributions to the Theory of Sexuality* (1903), children elaborate on sexual ‘theories’ concerning their origin, which concern the castration complex, their treatment as sexual objects, or the sadistic conception they have of the sexual act: “If children at so tender an age witness the sexual act between adults they cannot help conceiving the sexual act as a kind of maltreating or overpowering; that is, it impresses them in a sadistic sense” (Freud 1995: 564).

For this reason the passage signals Marie’s irreversible loss of innocence and the abandonment of her childhood world: “Her hand [Auntie’s] caught me on the cheekbone and left a bruise . . . She said I would have to understand it was all for the best. She sat on the stairs and cried. I’d never seen her do that before. It was then that I realised that something was broken, and that I’d done it” (1993: 59). Marie spends the rest of her childhood in the convent as a boarder, later moving to college in Cambridge. However, Marie’s entrance in adulthood has not been fully realised, for she has yet one conflict to resolve, an acknowledgement to make, which ultimately pertains to her own identity and sexuality: “She [Auntie] never met my lover because I didn’t invite her to . . . I was ashamed of letting my friends see her . . . I punished her for all this, and more, by keeping aloof, not bothering to write . . . I preferred it that way” (59).

#### 7. CHARITABLE FORGIVENESS, RECONCILIATION AND RECOVERY

Marie’s own process of reconciliation, of ‘charitable’ forgiveness is fuelled by the contemplation of female icons of the three Theological Virtues at the Herziana Library in Rome while on a trip with her lover: “I flicked through an old book of engravings I picked at random from the shelf. Allegories. The battle of the soul. The Virtues. There she was, Mrs Charity, feeding four babies from her bare white breast and no black square stuck over it. For some reason, that evening I rang Auntie in Manchester from the hotel. I learned that her funeral had been the week before. Lung cancer. She’d never mentioned it” (1993: 60).

The maternal body appears now inevitably lost in a literal sense, and Marie’s recovery must be accomplished in some other way. Marie’s process of mourning is propelled by her remembrance; significantly, she shares her memories with a friend with whom she establishes, at last, a bond of female affinity and mutual understanding, prior to her acknowledgement of Auntie’s true status in her life:

I was alone and separate now, no kindly academic lover to translate for me, mediate between me and the world. Talking in Italian felt truer than my usual English speech. Because another woman sat there, delicate and solid, and listened to me with interest and wanted me to go on. Opening my mouth, I tasted ash, I bit into shards of glass, I swallowed dust. The word Auntie meant a warm flannelette back in bed, a tobacco kiss, yet the bed was empty and her mouth gone. I stumbled along, finding Italian words one after the other, rolling them, sour milk, over my tongue. (62)

Marie's entrance into maturity and independence leans on the restoration of her mother's name to her family history which, in turn, encompasses the unifying of her mother's split identity which had characterised her childhood: the "spiritual" mother, the iconic Madonna and the eroticised mother, Auntie, the prostitute, who recalls Mary Magdalene. The biblical prostitute reconciles the spiritual and the sexual in the female, a motif which has been extensively looked into by Roberts in her fiction and essays. Against the Catholic denial of the body, there emerges Mary Magdalene as "a highly coloured version of the eternal feminine", as the very image of the "return of the repressed: the numinous body, sexiness and holiness intertwined", "a figure of glorious contradiction" (Roberts 1998: 27–29).

## 8. CONCLUSION

Marie's narrative —her own reconstruction of the past— dramatises not only her impulse and need to come to terms with herself and construe a stable identity, but also to recover what she thought forever lost, the maternal body, in a process that implies both "remembering" and "re-membering" (Roberts 1998: 20). Marie's recognition, the charitable "blissful mutual giving and taking" which Roberts describes (20) as exclusively pertaining to motherhood, is fully accomplished in the narrative's closure, where the eroticised dream of communion between child and lactating mother is effected. In more literal terms, Marie's successful juxtaposition of her mother's fragmented identity into a unified image of her is discursively marked in her narrative by the beautiful intersection of feminine images which close the story: "Our Lady of Perpetual Succour Mrs Charity Auntie my young erotic mother" (1993: 62).

According to Roberts, recovering the maternal, the mother's body as "paradise" can be achieved not only through "re-membering", but also through the rejection of paternal omniscience in favour of a fragmented, contradictory "I" in childhood which paves the way for understanding adulthood: "If we stay in touch with our own imagination, our own unconscious, our own autobiography, our own childhood, we are more tender towards our own children . . . The place of imagination is also perhaps to remind us of the costly effects to our society of either/or thinking, to invite us to a crazy kind of dance inventing some new steps, humming some new kind of music" (Roberts 1998: 22).

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